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The Art of Haute Cuisine

Jim Ewel '79

Julie Bunner

By Jim Ewel
Illustrations by Julie Bunner

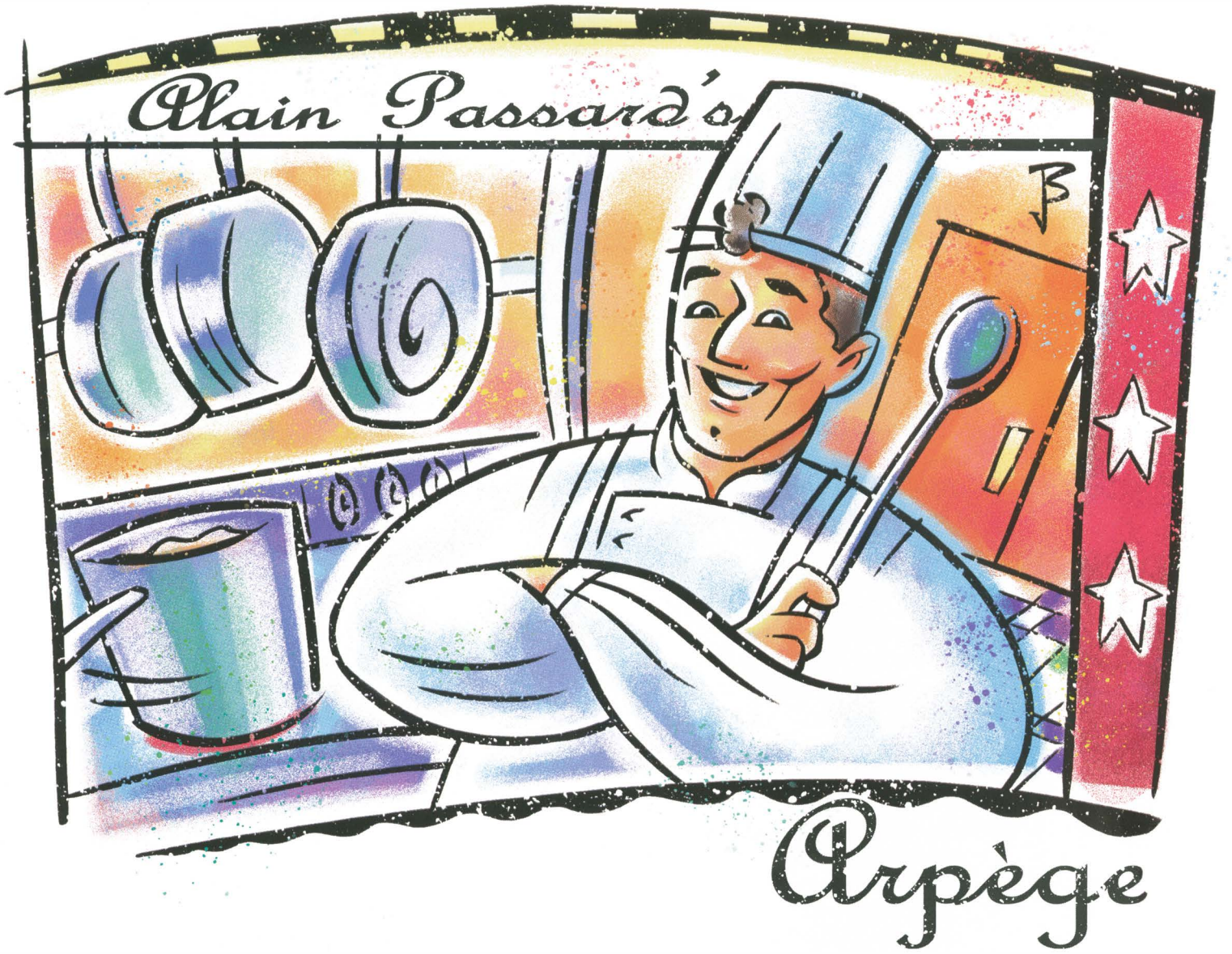
The Art of Haute Cuisine

An internationally acclaimed restaurant offers the perfect setting for a man's desire to test — and indulge — his love for cooking.

"Deux poulets, deux pêche." "Oui, Monsieur!" everyone responds loudly.

So begins the intricate ballet that results in two slowly roasted chickens and two perfectly grilled fish being served to customers at Alain Passard's *Arpège*, a Michelin three-star restaurant just down the street from the Rodin Museum in Paris. I am in the kitchen of *Arpège*, living out a dream.

Some men attend fantasy baseball camps. I am indulging in my own fantasy as a *stagiaire* (an unpaid apprentice) for a week in one of the best restaurants in the world.



I have been a serious amateur cook for many years. At Furman in the late '70s, I lived off campus during the summers, and I cooked for myself and occasionally for others. After Furman I moved to Philadelphia, just as the restaurant scene began to heat up with establishments like Steven Pose's *Frog, Commissary* and *Eden*. After working for a couple of years, I could afford to eat out occasionally, and I began to form strong opinions about the kind of food I liked, both to eat and to cook. I devoured cookbooks, trying this and that, and developed a repertory of meals that I served to family and friends.

In 1997, as part of a sabbatical, I attended cooking school at *La Varenne* in Burgundy. There I learned the basics of French cuisine and came to appreciate the cooking demanded by Michelin before it bestows its highest rating, the coveted three stars.

Then in the summer of 2001 I moved to Paris for a year with my family, and my cooking skills blossomed. I attended a second cooking school, in Gascony, with Robert Reynolds, a former chef at *Le Trou* restaurant in San Francisco. Robert taught me a new approach to cooking: shopping at the local market every day, choosing only the freshest, most seasonal ingredients, and making up a menu *after* you have your ingredients, not before.

France is justly famous for its wonderful markets. Twice a week in some locations, every day in others, vendors in small stalls sell the freshest vegetables, fish, chicken, lamb, beef and dairy products you have ever seen. The colors, the smells, the textures almost overwhelm the senses. Along with incredible wines and a great variety of cheeses, these ingredients create a cook's paradise.

The French cook seasonally. Unlike in the United States, where almost everything is available year round, trucked in or flown in from distant locations, most produce comes from local farms and is available only at certain times of the year. This approach to cooking and eating results in foods that are at the peak of their flavor.

Nearly everyone in France has strong opinions about food and favorite recipes. I knew a wonderful *poissonnier*, or fish vendor, just down the street from my apartment, and on the way back from the market I would often stop to inquire about what had just arrived and what was freshest. He would direct me to a particular fish, sometimes something I had never tried before, and I would ask him how to prepare it. He typically offered a simple recipe, suggested accompaniments, and ended with the pursed lips and air kiss, indicating *c'est déliceux* (it's delicious).

s people come to know me and understand my passion for cooking, they often ask if I plan to become a chef or restaurateur. I admit that I've thought about it, but the long hours and the working conditions (lots of heat and noise) have tended to put me off.

Still, the idea has always remained in the back of my mind, and when I read an article in the *New York Times* about a program through Relais and Chateux, a trade organization of fine hotels and restaurants, offering the opportunity to work for a week in a restaurant of fine cuisine, I decided I had to try it. Not only would it be a uniquely memorable experience, but it would also give me a chance to find out firsthand about working in a restaurant, and to satisfy my curiosity about attempting a new career as a chef.

My week began rather inauspiciously. George Bush was in Paris for a meeting with Jacques Chirac, the president of France, and the police had closed several metro stations for security reasons, including my transfer station and the station closest to the restaurant. As a result, I had to take a roundabout route to the restaurant, and after a 15-minute walk from the next nearest station, I arrived about 10 minutes late. The front door to the restaurant was locked. I had a phone number, but no one answered. Finally, after examining my paperwork, I noticed that the street address I'd been given was that of a small, unmarked door just down the street from the restaurant. Sure enough, it led to the kitchen.

I was first given a tour, both upstairs and downstairs. The kitchen was surprisingly small, perhaps 15 feet by 25 feet, and crammed with stoves, pots and pans, and stainless steel counters. Downstairs were the bakery, the walk-in refrigerator, the wine cave and a small room that served as a private dining room or an overflow room if the restaurant was crowded. Upstairs was the main kitchen, with stations for grilling both meat and fish, the vegetable station, the sauce station, the *garde manger* (where cold foods such as salads and desserts are assembled), and two dishwashing stations. A central counter served as a center for assembling the plates and checking them before they went out. Every inch of space was used.

After the tour, I was put to work pinching the ends off green beans and stripping peas from their shells. Even though I have been cooking for years, I was fumble-fingered compared to my much younger fellow cooks. I finished shelling an impossibly large bowl of peas after perhaps 45 minutes, only to have one of my hosts return with another equally large bowl to be shelled. I was told that it typically takes them about 15-20 minutes to shell all these peas, which they do every day.

Everyone was relaxed but working quickly. "No one talks very much. It is better for the concentration," one of the cooks told me. He was right. Perhaps there was a little more conversation this morning because I was asking questions, but in general everyone was quiet, working very intensely with the food in front of him.

Each station was extremely neat and organized. I soon learned that for any job, I would need three containers: one for the raw ingredient (peas to be shelled, turnips to be peeled and sliced, mussels to be de-bearded), one for the finished product, and one for the scraps. After every step, the station was wiped down and cleaned.

This process — the preparing of what the French call *mise en place* — is very important. During service, when customers are in the restaurant and everyone is cooking, there is no time to cut up anything. Everything that can be done in advance without compromising quality is done. Green beans are cooked in salted water until almost done, then plunged into ice water to stop the cooking. Later, just before serving, they are sautéed in a pan with a little bit of water, lots of butter, sliced peaches and fresh almonds.

The amount of work that goes into some of the dishes is amazing and not always related to the cost of the dish or its importance to the customer. For example, by the end of the week one of the jobs that I came to hate was cutting up the "salad." This wasn't as simple as tearing a few leaves of romaine or iceberg lettuce. Instead, I was given a large container of watercress and asked to snip off only the best leaves with scissors. It took 15 or 20 minutes of painstaking work to get a handful, more than an hour to get enough for service.

Later, I learned that these leaves are included in tartlets, which are sometimes served as an *amuse bouche* (literally "amuse the mouth," a sort of pre-appetizer) or as an accompaniment to another dish. At the end of the week, when I ate at the restaurant, I popped one in my mouth. It was good, but all I could think of was the amount of time I spent cutting all those tiny leaves off the stems. Was it worth it? Not to my American mind, but the French are obsessed with detail. The thought of increasing the efficiency of the kitchen by omitting these little tartlets (which genuinely wouldn't be missed by most customers) would never occur to them, and when I asked, they just shrugged their shoulders. It is this dedication to quality, whatever the cost, that makes these restaurants so great.

Earlier in the year I had observed a more spectacular example of this obsession with detail. I had eaten at Paul Bocuse's eponymous restaurant in Lyon, about two hours south of Paris by train, and one of the dishes on the menu was *Rouget barbet en écailles de pommes de terre croustillantes* — red mullet with crisp potato scales. In this dish, the cooks layered tiny, thin slices of potato on a fish fillet to give the appearance of fish scales. The taste was wonderful and the visual effect breathtaking. The skill and the amount of work it took to duplicate the scales of the fish in potato were simply amazing.

If anyone thinks that the secret to great cuisine is the equipment, a morning in *Arpège* would disabuse them of this notion. The *chinois*, a sort of fine sieve for straining sauces, has holes in it and is almost falling apart. The pots are not gleaming copper, but the much more utilitarian aluminum. But if it is important to the quality of the final result, the equipment is the best available. The stove

delivers lots of heat in a consistent and predictable fashion, the knives are incredibly sharp and efficient, and although the pans may be aluminum, they have thick, heavy bottoms to deliver heat evenly.

More important to the final result is the quality of the ingredients — and there is no room for compromise. All morning, suppliers delivered goods selected especially for *Arpège*. I asked about the fish, and was told that Chef Passard has worked with the same supplier for 15 years. Every day before dawn the supplier goes to Rungis, the huge food distribution center in the suburbs of Paris, selects the freshest fish that has come in overnight from all over France and Europe, then drives it to the restaurant. In most cases, the fish is in the sea the day before it is served in the restaurant.

Everything is closely examined, and if it doesn't pass muster, it is rejected. One morning, the ravioli squares had small dark spots in them. The supplier was called, chewed out, and one hour later replacements were delivered to the restaurant.

Another "secret" is the importance of cooking very slowly, to give the flavors time to develop. One of the chef's signature dishes, onions with a gratin of Parmesan and black pepper, consists of onions cooked so slowly (sweated, in cooking parlance) that they don't color at all but simply become velvety soft. His chicken is not roasted in the oven but cooked on each side in a casserole dish for almost three hours. All this is designed to develop the best and most complex flavors imaginable, and it succeeds impressively.

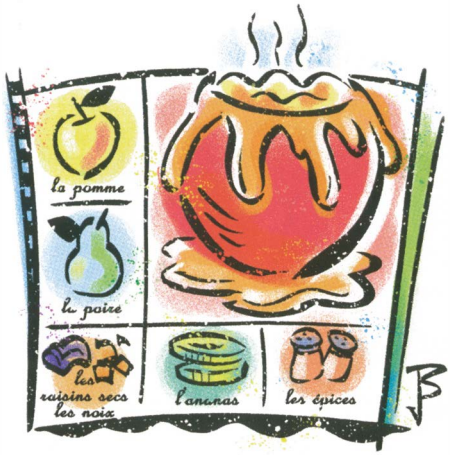
Chef Passard's most famous dessert, a small tomato stuffed with a dice of apple, pears, pineapple, raisins, nuts and 12 spices, is cooked all morning on the edge of the stove, constantly bathed in a rich caramel. In the end, it becomes a complex dissertation on the tomato as fruit (which it is, horticulturally speaking), full of rich sugars and contrasting spiciness.

Around 12:30 we receive our first order, and the pace quickens. Early in the morning everyone was working quietly but efficiently, but now the noise level increases and people are flying around the kitchen. There is no time for questions or instruction, and I become a spectator. Because there is so little room in the kitchen, there are only two places I can stand and not be in the way — by the telephone or by the dishwasher. Occasionally, I pitch in to remove steamed mussels from their shells or to whip some cream.

The kitchen crew's tolerance for heat is amazing. The meat man tends his chickens in their casserole dishes by hand, reaching right into the pot to turn them. The vegetable man does the same, reaching into the pan to grab a carrot, tasting it for flavor and adjusting the seasoning. All the plates are hot, warmed under the Salamander, an open broiler that throws off waves of heat and is used for the gratins and for finishing off the fish. I notice that almost everyone has little burn scars on the underside of their arms or on their hands.

The waiters enter and call out the orders, which are posted on small sheets of paper held to the wall by clips. Gunther, the chef's second in command, directs traffic, indicating what he wants, asking how much longer for a particular dish, and preparing the plates. Just before each dish goes out, three or four people huddle around it, dripping sauces, applying salt and giving the plate a last minute swipe with a cloth to make sure that the edges are clean.

The finished dish is a work of art. As soon as it is ready, a waiter is summoned and the plate is rushed out to the customer, to be delivered as quickly as possible so that it is hot from the pan.



The pace is frenetic, with everyone dashing around the kitchen. "Chaud, chaud," cries the fish guy as he runs with a hot plate of freshly grilled fish and pops it in the oven. Pots clang against the stovetop as the cooks swirl the ingredients, glazing the vegetables in butter. Every few minutes I hear the whine of the immersion blender, as each sauce is freshened into foam before being applied. On occasion the scent of a dish reaches me and I breathe in deeply, imagining the intense flavor.

At 3:30, lunch is over and everything is cleaned up. The staff take a break until 6 and nearly everyone leaves to get their own lunch, run errands, meet friends, perhaps even take a nap if they live nearby.

The staff joke about the 35-hour work week. Although officially no one is supposed to work more than 35 hours, in reality almost everyone works from 9 in the morning until 12:30 or 1 a.m., with a break mid-afternoon, five days a week. The restaurant is closed on weekends but open throughout the year, including August. This is unusual in France, where most businesses shut down for August while their staff take vacation.

In effect, then, the cooks work 65 hours a week, and although by law everyone is entitled to five weeks of vacation a year, it's hard to take off that much time. Gunther, the chef's number two, has taken off only two weeks in the last two years.

The stress and the pace make this a job for the young. Other than the chef, who is perhaps in his late 40s, everyone is under 30. Nor do they stay at *Arpège* long. Gunther has been at the restaurant for five years, but he is the exception. For the most part, no one has worked there for much more than a year, and a typical tenure is six months to two years.

The chef, Alain Passard, was out on my first day, but did arrive on the second day and was very active in the kitchen, examining each plate as it went out, throwing out a suggestion here and there, and lending a helping hand when things got really busy. On the evening of the second day, I witnessed the famous French temper.

It began with Passard being dissatisfied with the preparation of a chicken. Although it looked beautifully browned to me, he was unhappy with the colorization and the interior texture. He yelled at the meat guy for perhaps 10 minutes, then turned to me and in his most disgusted voice said, "He's been here six months, cooking those chickens every day, and he still can't get them right. Six months!" Although he didn't say it that loud, I'm sure the meat guy could hear him.

I was shocked. It would be highly unusual for a boss to publicly dress down an employee in most American businesses, and if it were done too often, no one would work for him or her. But from what my French friends tell me, Passard's outburst was not that unusual for France. In fact, French teachers have a reputation for yelling at kids in school and administering punishments for minor infractions. Some of our American friends pulled their children out of French schools for this reason. On the other hand, the French generally have good discipline in the later grades and thus are able to focus more on teaching than on keeping order.

Strictness in the classroom carries over into the workplace. Friends who work in French businesses report that they are expected to run meetings with a firm hand. Instead of asking for input from their employees, they are told to issue very explicit, direct instructions. And if the quality of the work doesn't meet their standards, supervisors like Alain Passard aren't afraid to yell to make their point.

The chef is also the creative force of the restaurant and a smart businessman. During my week, he created a new dessert with cherries, in a sauce of red fruits and rhubarb, topped by a browned *sabayon,* a sauce prepared by whipping eggs by hand for almost 15 minutes over a steam bath. He also produced some new recipes for a firm that makes diet protein shakes — another way to get his name before the public.

As the week drew to a close, I met my wife for Friday lunch, courtesy of the restaurant. We gave the staff *carte blanche* to prepare a tasting menu, and they outdid themselves.

They began with the little tartlets of salad that I had spent so much time cutting — an inside joke. A simmered egg filled with whipped cream and maple syrup followed. The egg yolk was barely cooked, like a soft-boiled egg, and I whipped it up at the table with the little spoon provided. The egg mixed with the whipped cream and the maple syrup to form a sort of mousse, and it was heavenly. Next, a martini glass arrived, filled with langoustine and avocado mousses on a bed of caviar, topped with pistachio oil. Gazpacho with a dollop of mustard ice cream provided a study in contrasts, the bite of the mustard accenting the sweetness of the tomatoes and red peppers in the gazpacho.

A few mussels followed, covered with a saffron sauce, herb sauce and *sabayon.* Then beetroot with balsamic vinegar, another study in contrasts, and langoustines, which were lightly spiced, then pan-seared quickly and served with a simple sauce made from the pan drippings. The last main dish was a small portion of roasted chicken, served with spring vegetables. Dessert consisted of a few thin mint cookies to clear the palate, followed by small but very sweet strawberries in hibiscus syrup.

The week had come to an end, and I was exhausted. Five days of working from nine in the morning

until after midnight had taken their toll. But I had realized my objectives. I knew now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that working in a restaurant, at least at this level, isn't for me. The hours, the stress, the heat, the noise are too much for me at 45. But I also had an unforgettable experience and left with an understanding of what it takes to succeed at this level: the hard work, the creativity, the concentration and the attention to detail.

Now, whenever I eat out and see some detail that I know requires a lot of hard work in the kitchen, I think back to those little salad tartlets. "Snip, snip, snip" go the scissors in my mind, and I'm thankful both that I had the experience, and that it isn't my day job.

Jim Ewel graduated from Furman in 1979 with a degree in English. He and his family returned to their home near Seattle July 31.

A *French* sabbatical

Jim Ewel (without the chef's hat) and his colleagues in the Arpège kitchen take a break before the dinner rush begins.

In early 2001, I had a rewarding job at Microsoft as vice president of marketing for Windows Servers. I had been in the computer industry for a little over 20 years, the last 12 with Microsoft. I was happily married, with two wonderful kids, and settled into the community of a small town just northeast of Seattle.

While life was good, I was ready for a break. Years of working 50, 60, 70 hours a week had taken their toll, and Microsoft had changed. The relatively small company I joined, with fast acting, very focused groups, was turning into a more typical large corporation, with the attendant bureaucracy and politics.

The industry itself had also changed. Many of the participants were no longer driven by the passion for technology. Instead, everyone was in business for the IPO — that magic moment that would make them rich. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do next, but I knew that I needed a change.

For years, my wife, Lynly, and I had talked about living abroad. When I was a kid, the Army had moved my family to Germany for three years, and I had always felt that I was richer for the experience of having lived in another country and another culture. My view of what life could offer was broader, and my sympathy for other customs and people was deeper. Lynly and I wanted to be able to offer the same opportunity to our children, Charlie and Emma, and since they had lived all their lives in the suburbs, we also wanted to introduce them to urban life. What better city for just such an experience than Paris?

Our year in Paris was both more difficult and more rewarding than we anticipated. Although Lynly and I had traveled extensively, including several trips to France, we quickly discovered that being comfortable traveling in a country doesn't necessarily translate into comfort with living in a country.

Our first few months were hard. Tasks that we would accomplish easily in America, without much thought, were suddenly difficult and made us uneasy. Although both of us had taken French in high school and college, our language skills weren't really up to the task of negotiating a mobile phone contract, or arguing with a repairman about whether he had done a job right (two tasks that we had to take on during our first week). Our children missed their friends and the ability to run outside to play in our yard. But we adapted and overcame many of these obstacles.

The end result was that I discovered skills and talents that I had long neglected, including cooking and writing. We also made lifelong friends. And in an unexpected way, I discovered things about my own culture that I had taken for granted. I had to move 5,000 miles away to realize some of the advantages of my own back yard, both figuratively and literally.

— Jim Ewel